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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 PARIS 001714

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/10/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [FR](#)

SUBJECT: FRENCH MINORITIES AND NATIONAL IDENTITY -- AN
INITIAL LOOK AT THE DEBATE ON WHAT IT MEANS TO BE FRENCH

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Kathleen Allegrone for
reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: In early November 2009, President Sarkozy launched a national debate on what it means to be French -- that is, the French "national identity." Confronting an increasingly globalized world and struggling with self-identity issues, including whether Muslim "burqas" should be banned in public, and whether to grant minorities some kind of affirmative action-type opportunities, Sarkozy claimed that France would likely benefit from a national discussion about how race, national origin and religion fit in with traditional French assumptions of national identity. If handled properly, this debate could open a more honest assessment of the difficulties faced by minorities and immigrant communities in France and perhaps lead to improvements in integration and access. Initially, however, the debate has been cast as a Sarkozy ploy to reinforce his tough messages on immigration and secularism in advance of regional government elections next March. Some argue that Sarkozy and PM Fillon have already bee

n forced to moderate the debate which had taken a very heated tone. There is also concern that the debate could enhance the standing of France's far-right National Front party, in a manner similar to Switzerland's recent referendum on minarets. END SUMMARY.

"WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE FRENCH?"

12. (C) Although considered a taboo topic espoused in the past only by extreme-right Jean-Marie Le Pen and his National Front Party (FN), the question of whether immigration is threatening French national identity is gaining wider acceptance as the government encourages the French public to have a vigorous national debate on the issue for the first time in history. Slated to run from November 2009 until January 31, 2010, what is being billed by the government as the "Great Debate" has opened up politically fraught issues against a backdrop of socio-economic tension that may force a country that still does not officially recognize racial differences to rethink its identity in the 21st century.

13. (C) With one of the highest proportions of minorities and the largest Muslim community in Western Europe, France has seen in recent times unrest in underserved suburbs, a political movement against "burqas" (a term generalized to indicate any Muslim female robe that covers the body from head to toe), a recent wariness over minarets, and recurring tension over political and economic access and opportunity. France's minority communities largely perceive the national identity project as an electoral ploy by Sarkozy's majority party (the UMP) to court the far-right, although minority leaders could turn the potentially problematic issue into an opportunity for real discussion by fully engaging in the debate.

THE GREAT DEBATE ON NATIONAL IDENTITY

¶4. (C) As promised during his presidential campaign, Nicolas Sarkozy created the French Ministry of Immigration, Integration, National Identity, and Co-Development when he first came to office in 2007. Sarkozy entrusted former Socialist Party member and current Immigration Minister Eric Besson with the mission to slow illegal immigration through the cooperative development of their countries of origin, to improve the social integration of migrants, and to promote a French national identity.

¶5. (C) On November 2, Besson launched a three-month, nationwide debate on national identity in France by highlighting the opportunity to "re-launch a sense of pride in being French." Besson sent an information kit and talking points on French history, culture, religion, and language to regional officials. Sarkozy ordered every prefect (senior national government administrator) in every department in France to organize village and town hall meetings on this theme. Besson's team also launched an interactive multimedia website called the "Great Debate on National Identity" -- www.debatidentitenationale.fr -- dedicated to gathering opinions from citizens and public figures on the issue.

¶6. (C) To address critics who claim the debate is merely an electoral ploy, Besson moved up the date to release the results from late February to February 4, 2010, stating that he wished to purposely distance the public release from elections. Most opposition politicians have dismissed the national identity initiative as cynical and potentially dangerous, labeling it an attempt to shift the national conversation to subjects of flag-waving and security that

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could favor Sarkozy and the UMP in the mid-term regional elections. Recent polling suggests that the national identity project could be losing favor with the French public.

¶7. (SBU) In addition to discussing the singing of the national anthem the "Marseillaise" once a year in schools and providing free civic education classes for adults, Besson wants politically-charged issues to be high on the agenda for these meetings taking place across France, including the need to outlaw the burqa, and how to share French values with immigrant citizens. Speaking on national television on October 25, Besson stated that he was against the practice of wearing burqas in public, claiming that "the burqa runs counter to national values." The government has rejected the argument that this debate could inflame nationalist sentiment and play into the hands of the National Front Party (FN), claiming instead that the GOF is attempting to reclaim the "symbols of France" for the mainstream French public. In this, the project is supported in a backhanded manner by former Socialist presidential candidate Segolene Royal, who championed the flying of the national flag during her 2007 campaign, and asser

ted that Sarkozy had "stolen" the Socialist Party's issue (a claim also made by the FN). Although initially hesitant to engage on the topic, the French public is coming around to the debate. Besson's office claims that there have already been more than 40,000 opinions submitted to the website (6-7 percent of which were deemed "racist").

¶8. (SBU) Rama Yade, Secretary of State for Sports, political icon, and one of the Sarkozy government's few minority members characterized the national identity debate as necessary to address the fundamental problem of discrimination against minorities. Others have not been so positive. Former Gaullist Prime Minister (and Sarkozy rival) Dominique de Villepin recently termed the debate "a bomb -- absurd and autocratic." From the left, Jean-Luc Melenchon, President of the Leftist Party (Party de Gauche), recently commented, "What is it to be French? To be French is to have a French identity card and the rights thus accorded." While Sarkozy absented himself from a public discourse on the

issue, sending his PM instead, Sarkozy issued a December 9 editorial in Le Monde, in which he opined that "a national identity is the antidote to tribalism and community divisions."

"MINORITIES AND DISCRIMINATION DO NOT OFFICIALLY EXIST IN FRANCE"

¶9. (C) In a November 13 meeting with Congresswoman Barbara Lee, Congressman Mike Honda, and poloffs, Rama Yade weighed in on the national identity debate, saying that unlike in the United States, there is no official recognition of minorities in France. Explaining that the first principle in France remains loyalty to the French Republic itself, Yade, a Muslim who was born in Senegal and emigrated to France as a young girl, said that minorities, and thus discrimination, do not officially exist because the state only recognizes individuals as French citizens under the banner of "liberty, equality, and fraternity." Although France prides itself on enshrining "French" values, Yade said there are constant claims of injustice and discrimination in housing and employment, mainly from Arab and black minorities, because of the "serious denial of reality" and the fact that "we are regarded as minorities" in practice. As one of the most popular French politicians, and one of an unprecedented three minority and female ministers appointed by the Sarkozy government, Yade spoke of the tremendous and yet "fantastic burden" of representing those without opportunity. She credited Sarkozy for being ahead of the curve and more progressive than his own party for trying to introduce affirmative action in France, despite the political backlash he suffered for his attempt to raise awareness of the marginalization of minorities.

¶10. (C) Yade shared her impression that most French-born minorities feel largely excluded from French society and feel that they do not have rights. She mentioned that the GOF created the organization HALDE to process discrimination cases in 2004, acknowledging that the problem indeed exists in French society. Following the unsuccessful 2006 colorblind hiring scheme enacted by the Prime Minister, Yade stated that the French national employment agency is attempting again to implement the use of "anonymous resumes," which eliminate all reference to the applicant's name, sex, age, address, nationality, or family situation in order to increase professional opportunities for people of diverse backgrounds. She expressed disappointment that the powerful lobbying efforts of the business community continue to block full implementation of the recruitment law, despite the renewed efforts of President Sarkozy's Special Advisor for

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Equal Opportunity, Yazid Sabeg.

¶11. (C) Speaking on a personal level, Yade said that it is hard to be from a minority in France because many grow up without any opportunity to learn about their historical roots and ethnic background. Commenting that the education system is a part of the problem, Yade said that school children are not taught to embrace their ethnic identity because all French citizens ultimately share the same "Gaullist ancestry" and that their founding father is Clovis, despite the fact that she, for example, immigrated to France from Senegal at age 10. Yade stressed that minority youth view their parents as victims who have not yet won the acceptance of the French majority and that they take to the streets, frequently with violence, to demand respect and bring attention to their sense of injustice.

¶12. (C) Remarking that the French public rejected affirmative action or "positive discrimination" as anti-Republican, Yade blamed the lack of minorities in public office on France's conservative political environment and the fact that the political parties do not promote minority candidates, thus depriving the population of the opportunity to support candidates from minority backgrounds. However, at a December

8 breakfast, Yade noted that she had come to support the idea of some limited affirmative action in an effort to equalize access to higher education. Yade acknowledged that affirmative action often led to minorities being considered less qualified by their white peers, but noted that might be a necessary trade off to increase the numbers of minorities with access to higher education, which she believes is "the great equalizer."

REJECTING MULTI-CULTURALISM

¶13. (C) During her discussion with Codel Lee/Honda, Yade called President Obama's election "an inspiration to French minorities." At the same time, Yade asserted that the French public and government have historically rejected multi-culturalism in the name of secularism, stating that "there are no differences between us because we are all French." She noted that the national debate on French identity reflects the fact that France is currently at a crossroads and that the issue of discrimination against minorities, whether public or private, can no longer be ignored. Yade welcomed the debate, saying that in principle it would allow minorities an opportunity for the first time to share their perspectives on life in France. Yade said that the French must accept the reality of an increasingly multi-cultural demographic if they are to achieve their common goal of living and working together peacefully to avoid the return of the suburban riots of 2005 and 2007.

¶14. (C) On November 14, Socialist Party deputy George Pau-Langevin described for Codel Lee/Honda and poloff the slow but gradual progress of minority political participation in France, as compared to a decade ago. As the only minority candidate who ran for office in 2001 and currently the only minority MP elected from mainland France, Ms. Pau-Langevin described the 30 candidates from minority backgrounds sponsored by the Socialist Party in 2006 as "a real shock" to voters. Disagreeing with the official line that racial discrimination does not exist in France, Pau-Langevin said that she had originally proposed a law against discrimination that was blocked by the center-right. Born in Guadeloupe, Pau-Langevin noted that the legal prohibitions against collecting statistics on the French population made it difficult to prove institutionalized discrimination. She added that the refusal to accept multi-culturalism demonstrated that the days when a black Guinean could be President of the Senate as in the 1950s are long gone. The racial struggle in France is more similar to the situation in Brazil than the United States, according to Pau-Langevin, noting that Brazilians also represent a multi-cultural society where citizens are reluctant to fight for their rights.

A PREVIEW OF THE BURQA COMMISSION FINDINGS

¶15. (C) Pau-Langevin provided for Codel Lee/Honda a preview of the results of the parliamentary commission investigation on possibly banning burqas in the name of secularism. Currently touring the country, the burqa commission is scheduled to present their findings and recommendations to Parliament in January 2010, and thus likely to influence the final days of the national identity debate. As one of 32 lawmakers from across the political spectrum tasked with studying the wearing of burqas in France, Pau-Langevin described her opposition to the burqa as first and foremost rooted in her feminist values. Against any practice that "undermines female dignity," she remarked that she would

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absolutely support a ban on burqas in France. Calling the burqa a "symptom and not a cause of the problem," Pau-Langevin explained that the wearing of the burqa indicated a complete rejection of French values. She raised the question of why these women felt the need to ostentatiously display their religious identity in the

first place, stating that she interpreted the extremism to be a response to their exclusion from French society. Pau-Langevin shared her preliminary conclusions from speaking to French Muslims that many women are forced by their communities to cover themselves, oftentimes against their will.

¶16. (C) Pau-Langevin indicated that she will propose to the Socialist Party a compromise law that requires people to "reveal their faces" in public for security reasons rather than completely outlawing burqas, so as not to target the Muslim community. She added that such a law would then be counter-balanced by increased action on the part of the government to better integrate historically disenfranchised communities into French society.

THE SWISS EFFECT

¶17. (C) The November 29 decision in Switzerland to ban the construction of minarets on new mosques resonated for many French, further stoking the controversial debate over national identity and the potential burqa ban. While most French lawmakers were initially critical of the Swiss vote, an IFOP poll conducted for Le Figaro reported on December 3 that 46 percent of the French public supports a ban on minarets in France. The same poll showed that 41 percent are against the construction of new mosques, double the 22 percent figure provided by IFOP in 2001. According to the press, President Sarkozy allegedly told deputies that the outcome of the Swiss referendum reflected a Swiss fear of "losing their identity" that stirred similar feelings of resentment in France. Sarkozy recently asserted that all religious symbols should be modest and not provocative. (Note: France's Interior Minister has stated that France has 2,368 mosques, including seven "grand mosques" and 54 with "small minarets." The ministry notes that France has less than 4,000 catholic churches. End note.) Criticizing political parties for targeting Islam, Pau-Langevin told poloff on December 3 that all of the MPs on the burqa commission are against a ban on building minarets in France, stating that "secularism is not hostile to any particular religion but must remain neutral" so as to guarantee the right to a place of worship for all religions in France.

DIVERSITY CZAR CRITIQUES EXECUTION OF THE DEBATE

¶18. (C) A debate on national identity could have been a good idea but it has been poorly presented, according to Yazid Sabeg, President Sarkozy's Commissioner for Equal Opportunity, with the rank of Minister, since December 2008. Sabeg told the Ambassador December 14 that the GOF suddenly launched a national discussion about an extremely sensitive topic without precisely delineating the terms of debate. With the help of academics and experts, the debate could have been more inclusive and constructive; without this guidance, Sabeg warned, the process is divisive and now risks fanning the flames of right-wing extremism. For Sabeg himself, being French means possessing complete citizenship and full rights. These rights come hand in hand with civic responsibilities, he insisted, which cannot be demanded of citizens denied full membership in French society.

¶19. (C) In describing the aim of his work as France's "Diversity Czar," Sabeg said he seeks to transcend politics in order to help create equal opportunity in all sectors of French society. He described increasing "ghettoization" of minorities in France. When the Ambassador asked Sabeg why local leaders around France claim equal opportunity already exists, Sabeg responded that these people are describing "the French dream," not the French reality. As an example, he cited the near-complete absence of black or Arab members of the Senate or National Assembly. Indeed, the National Assembly, he said, "serves as a mirror of the crisis of representation in France." He also noted that none of France's approximately 180 Ambassadors is black, and only one is of Arab extraction. He said the French public is ready

for change, but he worries that President Sarkozy has recently positioned himself too far to the right on issues such as immigration, rather than inspiring national cohesion.

COMMENT

¶20. (C) Without doubt, the debate on national identity has

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mobilized voices from all political perspectives as France asks itself if the assimilation model of the past can cope with the globalized world of today. From a political perspective, although Besson publicly denies any connection between the controversy over the current Parliamentary commission on burqas and the national debate on identity, we judge that Sarkozy and his advisors are as motivated by the opportunity to consolidate the UMP's support on the right and keep the FN from making inroads beyond its far-right base ahead of the March 2010 regional elections as they are by the recognition that France has not reconciled its national identity with globalization.

RIVKIN